



SOMARAJAN PADINJARITTAM

DOCTOR IN THE FRONT

FOREWORD

Forty-five years have passed since the last major war with Pakistan, which resulted in the birth of a new nation, Bangladesh.

However, for me who took an active part in it as medical officer to an infantry battalion, its memories are still fresh. This must be because the intensity of those experiences must have left deep impressions on my mind, which wouldn't fade with time.

This is an account of my experiences of the few months preceding the war and of the sixteen-day war itself in December 1971, ending with our victory, the surrender of the PAK army and the birth of Bangladesh.

This account is very much personal and subjective (it is based on my diary notes of those days), but still I feel that it could be considered as a humble contribution to the history of recent events of national importance in our country.

DOCTOR IN THE FRONT

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1. THE MOVE.

It was Independence day, 1971 at Tezpur, north Assam. It was late evening. We were having a drink party at the JCOs' mess. All officers were there except the Commanding Officer. I had not yet had my initial interview with the CO, and now, an informal meeting at this party wouldn't take place either.

As was customary, there was a free flow of rum. Originally, before joining this new unit the day before, I had an idea not to touch alcohol on the pretext of having been a teetotaler all the time. That idea had flopped miserably the previous night itself at the Officers' mess when someone had pressed a drink on me. I had accepted it without even a façade of resistance, thanks to my deplorably deficient will power! And now, of course there was no way out but to sit and imbibe the stuff poured despite all protestations into my glass. Snacks went round again and

again. Officers and JCOs got up to exchange seats for 'mixing'. I continued to sit on my chair quite willing to give the benefit of 'mixing' to those around me. I had a busy time manufacturing topics out of thin air that too in Hindi, for the benefit of the JCOs on either side of me. Alcohol of course was a great help as its flow had washed off barriers and dissolved shells of reserve.

At last, it was time to get up. Lot of handshakes and 'thank you's, and we departed. With the hope of an early dinner and sleep, I went with the other officers to the mess. Someone had a 'brilliant' idea--to have another round of drinks before dinner! I cursed him heartily under my breath, but there was no alternative except to sit down once again and have a 'hell of a time'. Glasses were filled and passed around. The bar counter stools were shaped in the form of rocking horses with real saddles and stirrups fitted. I sat on one, put my feet in the stirrups and imagined myself riding an Arab

charger somewhat easily, with all that alcohol racing in my blood. Some of the younger officers had started to dance with each other, in lieu of fair partners. The adjutant, a mature fellow, came and sat on another 'horse' near me.

“Hello, doc”, he said. And then in a sort of confidential manner, “Do you know why we are celebrating this Independence Day in grand style like this”?

“Why, I thought that there was nothing unusual about it”, I remarked.

He tried to assume a mysterious expression (as far as his face, swollen with alcohol, would permit!).

“Well, doc”, he said in hushed tones, “this is just for your information. Please keep it secret.”

I nodded acquiescence.

“Our unit is moving in a few days to East Pakistan border”, said he in as solemn and imposing a manner as he could summon under the circumstances.

I experienced a shock in spite of all the numbness of the brain. It was not so much of fear as that of a feeling of ‘what a bother!’ I had had enough of moves already and had imagined that I had reached my final destination. I had hoped that I would be ending my Army days peacefully in this small Assam town. Now again, another move; and not a routine move at that, but an operational move, that too to a known trouble-spot. I am not sure whether I didn’t feel slightly scared also at the thought. I didn’t feel like taking dinner after that. I made my way out of the mess unobtrusively and went straight to bed.

Five days later, we had the CO's conference in the afternoon. For the first time CO gave details of the entire move, making everything crystal clear—the move starting the next morning, the day-to-day halts and the final destination at Dharmanagar, the last railway station which formed a sort of gateway to Tripura, the small fist-shaped state projecting into East Pakistan. We were to reach Dharmanagar within four days. On the last day we were to pass through Karimganj, where mine explosions were taking place almost daily. It was quite on the cards that the enemy would know about our move, and sabotage attempts could be expected. CO told all this in a matter-of-fact manner and we listened in silence.

“Well, gentlemen”, he said as a concluding remark, “I need hardly ask you to bear in mind that this is not a routine exercise, but a real tactical move”.

The words sounded ominous to me. So, after all, I was going to take part in actual operations. Well, I could at least boast of having seen war even during the short span of my service in the Army--- of course, assuming that I would come out of it intact! I remembered part of the solemn oath I had taken at the time of my commissioning: of promising to defend my Country 'even at the risk of my life'. Danger? Well, we had to pass through Karimganj, a known spy-nest barely 4 km from the East Pak border. The possibility of getting hit by a stray bullet or blown up sky-high by a mine explosion was very much there.

I was somewhat cross with myself for not taking in the situation with the seriousness it deserved. Was it the Real Me standing behind in complete detachment, looking on with a benign smile? More probably, it was sheer muddleheaded-ness and nothing else!

In the evening I went to the Air Defence regiment to the room of my old batch and room-mate at Lucknow, Capt. Prasad. We didn't bother to go to the mess, but sat in the room, sipping chilled beer and gabbing about so many things. The orderly brought food and we started eating.

“I hope this is not our ‘last supper’ together”, I said jokingly--- not cent per cent jokingly, though. Prasad cursed his fate of not being able to participate in the operational move. His unit was to remain at Tezpur itself.

My vehicle turned up and I said good-bye. Prasad pressed my hand warmly and wished “all the best”. I thanked him and departed.

We got ready in the morning, and the momentous move began. The unit ‘Panditji’ did pooja and applied ‘tilak’ on the jawans’ foreheads as we were moving out in the vehicles. I sat in a ‘jhonga’ (a modified jeep) with my

luggage. My 'batman' also came with me. As the vehicle moved out of Tezpur, I felt a sort of elation of thus actively participating in what must certainly be preparations for a thrust--- for it just couldn't be that all this mobilization came to nothing. So, in the last few months of my service I was going to see some real action, which after all, was the purpose of maintaining the Army during all the 'peace' years. Our battalion, being an ASC battalion, would play an important role in the mobilization of forward troops and their maintenance. If I came safe and sound out of the ordeal, it would be a precious experience to cherish in later life. Even if it was otherwise, what did it matter? Was I not having faith in our splendid philosophy which taught that the Real Self that we are, never perish. What if this bubble burst? I should be glad of moving a little nearer to the Supreme destination. Such were my thoughts at the time.

So we moved slowly south,

across the face of Assam. Shillong with its picturesque hills was unforgettable. There was a place called Kliehriat where myself and a colleague of mine, Capt. Puranchand, eager for a refreshing bath in cold water, descended a slope of dense jungle hearing the sound of running water. But the river was elusive; it was very far below, and we wisely abandoned the search. It was most foolish of us to walk in those dense jungles of Assam in the fading light---there could have been danger from animals as well as humans.

And so, our convoy slowly rolled towards the destination. Once, we had a much-needed shower bath in a cool gurgling stream with a mini waterfall. All along the road, children were greeting and saluting us---a morale booster indeed! At the broad Badarpur River, there was no bridge and our vehicles had to cross one by one by ferry---a most time-consuming procedure. My jhonga and ambulance containing two patients crossed over among the first

vehicles as priority. The patients were sent to the nearest military hospital.

I accompanied the CO in the move from Badarpur to Dharmanagar---the last and dangerous phase of the move. It was here that sabotage attempts could be expected. CO boldly drove in the forward most vehicle, getting down at bridges and looking carefully around the pillars etc. I felt a sense of exhilaration and pride rather than fear at the risk of danger.

By the grace of God, we reached Dharmanagar, the rail-head to Tripura and the southernmost railway station in the eastern sector, safe and sound. I accompanied the CO when he went to see his boss, the Brigadier. The Brig---known as 'fat blighter' in lower circles --- was relaxing in his room clad in a banian and lungi. He told CO that we were to move still further south, right to the centre of Tripura---a place called Teliamura, about 45 km from the East Pakistan border. The Brig confidently

predicted that no operation would take place before October.

So, next morning we moved again, and by noon, reached our final destination. I went round with the CO giving suggestions for the establishment of the camp. CO was bubbling with energy. Was it because he was a chronic bachelor who had concentrated all his faculties and energies to his job? I felt exhausted and after a hot 'khana', slept soundly on a camp cot in a make-shift tent.

Next morning, CO compelled me to accompany him to Agartala, capital of Tripura. I went reluctantly as all my uniforms were extremely shabby after the five days' journey. Agartala was 45 km from Teliamura and situated on the border with East Pakistan. We went straight to the airport as CO wanted to meet his boss the Brig., who was arriving. The crowd--the ladies in colourful dresses and the gents in smart clothes---seemed to me such a big con-

trast to the dreary atmosphere of all these days when we could come across only the poor village folk and of course the shabby 'olive greens' everywhere. I felt embarrassed in my shabby dress.

2 .THE PREPARATIONS.

To me, coming from the Himalayan ranges of NEFA, and now, after this dreary journey across Assam, Agartala seemed very attractive although it was only a moderately big ordinary town. The airport was right on the border, one runway even extending into Pakistan. The planes, as soon as they took off, had to take a sharp turn towards India as otherwise they could fly into Pakistan and could very well be shot down.

In the next few days we established ourselves in camp. My duty was to advise the CO on sanitary and medical matters. I shared a tent with a young lieutenant. At first I was a little irked at not being given a tent of my own but soon I realized that it was much better sharing it with someone in the terrible loneliness and monotony of the place.

The heat was unbearable, especially in the afternoons. Keeping the flaps of the tent wide open, we would lie down in the barest minimum of clothing for our siesta, hoping for a kind breeze. It was difficult to control the mind. It easily shook off the feeble attempts to restrain it and slid down happily to low levels.

‘Thiru Onam’ day came and went. Of course, it wasn’t different from any other routine, monotonous day. I made the happy discovery that I could tune in to Alleppey radio station at night, with good clarity at times.

One day a snake was killed in the camp and that afternoon I had to brush up my foggy knowledge about snakes and give a talk in Hindi to the troops. After a rather shaky start, I managed it fairly well.

Evenings were comparatively pleasant. The green fields seen from the sloping compound in which our tents

were pitched, reminded me of home. But what a difference! I had only to go ten miles as the crow flew towards west and I would be in Pakistan, and for sure get butchered or tortured.

Wearing the uniform at all times was a little tedious. But civvies were not allowed. It was all the more embarrassing when we had to walk in the streets of Agartala for purchases. People would stare at us. There could be many hostile eyes amongst them too. The people, especially the shop-keepers did not seem to care much for the Army. Like people from South India, they had no taste of war. That could be the reason why they took the Army for granted.

I had a visit to a town called Udaipur—a neat little place with a beautiful lake. The Rajasthani names in this place could be due to inter-marriages between Rajasthani and Tripura royal families in the past. On the road I saw an old army jeep plying as mini-

bus, carrying around 15 to 20 people! People were packed everywhere except on the wheels! Another funny sight: a chap sitting in the open dicky of a running car, holding on to a number of sheep on the luggage rack on top!

The rains made the whole area slushy. Water trickled in through the canvas. Books were the only things to relieve boredom at least to some extent. One day we had the rare luxury of seeing a film in the local cinema theatre.

My uniforms were getting worn out, and one day a funny thing happened. As I was wriggling into a jeep, I heard an ominous tearing sound, and passing my hand cautiously over the seat of the pant, I was horrified to make out a tear some 4 inches long! I had a tough time walking back to my tent somehow, with hand behind my back, giving the impression of a casual stroll, returning salutes by nods!

One morning, I got a message

from the adjutant to go with first aid kit, ambulance etc to an improvised helipad near-by. I rushed up just in time. A helicopter loomed into sight, and making a low circle, landed on the small strip, creating a virtual dust storm. When the dust subsided, out stepped Lt.Gen.Arora, G.O.CinC, Eastern Command and Lt.Gen. Shagat Singh, our Corps Commander. Gen.Arora shook hands with the few officers present, including myself.

On Vijayadesami day, the lieutenant who was my tent-mate and I went in civvies to Agartala. There was an immense crowd. I saw for the first time, the procession of the magnificently made Durga images.

CO went on casual leave for a few days. I saw him off at Agartala air-port. As the plane took off for Calcutta, I felt a nostalgic feeling rising up within me. When could I go home like that?

On the 14th of October there was

a rather tense atmosphere in the unit, following the vague information that there might be an air attack. Black-out precautions were strictly enforced. Had the 'balloon gone up' at last? I prayed to the Almighty to bless me with strength and courage for doing my duty in the best possible manner.

Night came and passed off, but nothing untoward had happened. It was obviously a false alarm.

An unfortunate incident took place two days later. I had gone on my routine sanitary round to an armoured squadron. The major commanding it was perhaps a little 'bossy' type and I was in no good mood either. We started on a wrong footing and it led to a tiff between us. He threatened he would report to my CO about my behaviour and I said 'go ahead'. However I did my sanitary round and came off. Later I realized the foolishness of our quarrelling with each other in the general atmosphere of tension that prevailed.

He must have realised it too, for he never reported to my CO. However that incident disturbed my mental equilibrium for quite some time. Anger really poisons the mind. What a great thing it would be if one can eradicate this evil feeling from one's mind, always drawing on an inexhaustible store of forgiveness? I thought of Gandhiji who could ask without the least trace of irony or bitterness, whether the Englishman who kicked his tooth off had hurt his foot in the process!

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The World Cup hockey final between India and Pakistan was taking place at Barcelona, Spain. I listened to the live radio commentary with my heart full of prayer and hope for India's victory. The thrilling initial goal followed by the disappointing equalizer, and the subsequent clincher by the Pakistanis took away the World Cup from our hands. Most depressing, but then it is all in the game. Well, let them

win in hockey all right, I thought, but if there is to be a war, we will just crush them to defeat.

The Pakistanis shelled Agartala town one evening, in late October. The shell burst in a crowded market place and killed five persons. Was it desperation that made them provoke us like this by hitting civilian targets purposely?

We got brand new medical equipment from Lucknow, thanks no doubt to the influence of Maj.Gen.Pillai, who knew our CO personally. During the subsequent few days I was busy unpacking, organizing and documenting it to my satisfaction.

News of the UN resolution admitting Communist China to the organization came around this time.

CO called me one day and told me that I should call on the Brigadier (who was staying in our camp) everyday and ask about his health. Certainly a far-

cical thing to ask “How are you, sir?” daily and too cheap a thing for a doctor as well---especially when the Brig. is as fit as anyone else or more so perhaps. I decided I wouldn't do it whatever CO thought about it.

I visited the new Field Hospital coming up in bamboo huts. Work was progressing fast.

November dawned. The unspoken question on everyone's lips was whether ‘the balloon would go up this month?’ I hoped it would be over soon so that I could take some casual leave in December and also put in my release application.

On 2nd November, I went to the Field Hospital and assisted the doctors there in managing the first battle casualties (our own troops). They had been deployed to put in sporadic thrusts to aid the Mukti Bahini. The arrangements for receiving the casualties were not perfectly stream-lined, especially

as the hospital had no time to establish itself properly. I was acutely aware of my own inexperience in this field.

In the army, it is usually a sanitary inspector-cum- compounder's job for a general duty medical officer. On rare occasions however, one gets a chance to do something really worthy of a doctor. I got an emergency call one afternoon and saw in my small M I room, a jawan struggling for breath—a case of acute asthmatic distress. Luckily the necessary medicines were available and I had the satisfaction of pulling him back out of the jaws of certain death, by God's grace. When emergencies come, they do so in a bunch perhaps. For, the same night I was confronted with a snake-bite case, and the next day, with a penicillin reaction case. Thank God, I could save these too. In my army career so far, no patient had chosen to pass away when under my care. Apart from the self-confidence it gave, it saved the bother of endless documentation which would follow the

death of a soldier.

A bright ray in the general monotony---“Vishesh Jayamala” presented by Lata Mangeshkar in Vividh Bharathi. The choice of songs was beautiful—really worthy of one who has dedicated her whole life to music.

Pakistani arms and ammunition (it included many Chinese weapons) captured by our jawans at Kamalpur, were on display in the unit. We saw it with pride and took photos of ourselves beside it, as if we had captured the whole lot! I felt pity for the poor Infantry chaps who had captured all these---- some were dead and gone; others were lying crippled for life in the hospital wards. Helmets stained with blood. What stories of horror and misery could these tell, if only they could speak! What a pity it is that in this late 20th century, when man takes pride as having reached the acme of civilization, he still has to fight each other like the savages of old times! When will the

time come, when humanity, instead of groping in the darkness, will see the light and use their wonderful gift of thinking apparatus towards the attainment of that light? That time must come however far away it is from now. The world will then consist mainly of people of Jesus-like or Gandhian traits and the Yahyas, Maos and Nixons will be only a negligible minority.

3. TO THE SIDE OF THE FRONT-LINE FIGHTERS

Maj.GenVed Prakash, boss of AMC in the Eastern Command, visited our area. There was a party in his honour at the Field Hospital. I also attended it. There was a good medical crowd. We were introduced to the General. He did not seem to be very pleased when he came to know that I was RMO of a supply battalion. Perhaps he must have thought that I had 'pulled wires' to get this comparatively trouble-free posting. In reality there was none more embarrassed or disappointed than myself to idle away my time in an ASC bn when my colleagues were doing real work, serving the brave infantrymen in the front or working in the Field Hospitals. If the General had asked me anything about how I liked my job, I could have told all this. However he didn't ask me anything more and so I didn't get a chance.

Well, within a week after the General's visit, I got fresh posting orders! It was something which I had always wanted, the posting as RMO to an Infantry battalion. Had it to do anything with the General's visit? Most probably, yes. Anyway, I and about twenty doctors from different regiments had been posted to Infantry battalions. Undoubtedly, Infantry had to be given top priority in the allotment of doctors at this time. The Army HQ posting order said: "Move forthwith". I was of course happy at the prospect of working with the brave soldiers at the front, instead of rotting in the supply unit in the comfortable rear, that too with the stigma of 'wire pulling'. I didn't feel scared or much bothered about the possibly tougher life ahead, may be due to blissful ignorance! However I did feel a little sorry at the prospect of 'moving' once again, and in leaving my unit to which I had become somewhat attached by then, de-

spite my dis-satisfaction with my work. The CO especially had been a nice gentleman and we had the best possible relations with each other. He was very sorry about my posting order and he made efforts to cancel my posting. This put me in a real dilemma.

I had no doubt at all that it would be in my best interests to go to the Infantry. It would boost my morale, it would give me self-confidence, and it would make me stronger through the crucible of tough and dangerous experience. But then my CO was so nice and considerate to me that I didn't have the heart to tell him that I really wanted to go and he need not try to get my posting order cancelled. This uncertainty continued for more than a week, and I stayed on in the unit despite the "Move forthwith" order from Army HQ as I was not yet relieved by the CO. It was most embarrassing for me to stay on as people would think that I was shirking duty at the front. I only hoped that the

Infantry battalion to which I had been posted wouldn't think that I was trying to get my posting cancelled due to fear.

To my relief, the uncertainty ended in a few days, since as I had expected, CO failed in his attempts to get my posting cancelled. So I was 'dined out' and one fine morning I bade farewell to the ASC bn which had been my home for the previous three months. I and the CO got a lift in the helicopter going to Agartala, the border town where my new unit was entrenched. This was my first trip in a helicopter. At the airport, I saw off CO who was going on a few days' casual leave. I then reported to the CO of the Infantry battalion to which I had been posted.

My new CO was also a nice gentleman. When I was presented to him, he remarked that I had taken quite some time to join the unit. I wondered whether he thought that I was reluctant to join the risky Infantry---but per-

haps it was due to my own guilty feeling. I explained the position to him.

In the next few days---the last days of November---I got acquainted with my new unit. There was another doctor who was on temporary duty with the battalion before my arrival. He had stayed on.

4. THE OFFENSIVE.

Two days after my joining the unit, there was a sand model conference wherein it was made known that our battalion had been given the task of putting an attack on the vital and well defended rail junction of Akhaura. So this was it at last! An offensive action into enemy territory! The tactical move from Tezpur seemed like child's play compared to this. With God's grace I might come out unscathed, but the possibility of death was very much there; and death seemed preferable to the other much worse alternatives of getting crippled for life or of falling into the hands of the Pakistanis as a prisoner. A mood of depression overtook me. I felt afraid; I was riddled with doubts whether I would be able to give prompt and efficient medical attention to the battle casualty right at the front, because of my inexperience. CO had asked the other doctor also to remain

with the unit. This gave rise to mixed feelings within me. I was irritated that I was not given sole responsibility, but at the same time I felt a little relieved also about the other chap remaining with me! If I had any illusions until then about having the slightest control over my mind, these were shattered. I found a crushing load of tension, fear, unhappiness, irritation etc accumulating in my mind as D day approached.

It had been decided that I was to go with the CO's party. This meant that I would be going right to the frontlines with the CO with two or three men and essential medical equipment, while the other doctor would remain a little behind with the bulk of the medical staff and equipment. So I selected my men and supervised the packing of essential items to be taken by me.

On the evening of November the 30th, after darkness had set in, we moved slowly and silently to the concentration area, right at the border.

We two doctors spent the night in the house of an advocate. In contrast to the rat-hole of a trench in which I had lived for the previous days, a room and a cot were great luxuries indeed! The advocate was an old freedom fighter and talked for some time about the old days. I went to sleep realising the morrow would witness a unique event in my life---that of taking part in an attack mission into a foreign nation!

5. INSIDE PAKISTAN!

December the first! Would this month bring to an end all this tension and worry? Would hatred and anger be replaced with the pleasant warmth of friendship and co-operation?

CO gave some final briefings during the forenoon. Around 5pm I packed up my few things in my haversack, said adieu to the kind advocate and set out on an entirely novel mission in my life. Silent and grave faces. It was quite on the cards that some of us would have to part with our lives and limbs that night---but who? 'Not me please God' must have been the prayer in everyone's heart. I wonder what the confirmed atheist would have felt in his heart of hearts in a situation like that. If he still couldn't turn to God for support, his fate was unenviable indeed!

I joined the CO's party and we waited silently until darkness fell.

Then we started moving slowly and silently in single file. We soon crossed the International border. I was in Pakistan, without a passport, of course! Deep in the interior we heard the rumbling of a train moving towards the north. It seemed sinister to me under the circumstances. It was most probably a Pakistani troops train moving to Akhaura, our destination. We moved on silently for some more time---and then we experienced the first taste of war. The Pakistanis started artillery firing. Probably, in spite of our secrecy, they must have come to know of our move. For, the firing was directly on the path we had followed. Agartala, behind us, was experiencing the worst possible shelling.

Those moments, my first experience at the receiving end of artillery shelling, were terrible indeed. I could hear a distant faint explosion, followed by a terror-striking whining noise, and then came the deafening explosion.

We lay flat on the ground in the absence of any other cover. CO moved around boldly amongst us, making us lie well scattered instead of in clumps to keep the number of possible casualties down. Those terrifying moments never seemed to end. Even with eyes closed, I could sense the flash of their air-burst shells and I would tense my muscles automatically trying in vain to make myself as small as possible, hoping against hope each time that one of those red-hot wicked looking splinters wouldn't pin me to the earth. I thanked God each time for sparing me. After a grueling fifteen minutes which seemed like eternity, the shelling stopped and everything was quiet again. The overpowering smell of burnt gunpowder remained in the air. Surprisingly, there were no casualties in our group.

We continued the onward march and around 9pm reached the village of Dhaturpalia which was to be our Forward Assembly Area (FAA) from where

company strength attacks were to be made in different sectors. We quickly dug up 'fox-holes' and when the Pakistanis started shelling once again, we could take proper cover. But I could not remain in the comparative safety of the fox-hole for long. CO decided to go forward and I had to accompany him. So we moved forward again and presently I could hear the crackle of small arms fire---that of rifles and light machine guns. I could also hear whining noises which I couldn't understand at first, but soon realized as that of bullets whizzing past with diminishing speed. I remember how we crossed a road one by one, as low and as fast as possible. Although the crossing took only seconds, it seemed much exaggerated to me because of the fear of being hit by a stray bullet. The cardinal rule is never to make oneself a silhouette against the skyline and to keep as low as possible---otherwise one would be a sitting duck for the enemy.

We came up with our commando platoon which was poised to make a desperate attack on a well-defended railway bridge. The officer who commanded them was a smart young captain, a happy-go-lucky person whom I had come to like very much, during our brief acquaintance. He seemed to be a little nervous, naturally enough, and watched silently as I examined a soldier who had sustained a hit on the head. I patted him reassuringly and tried to cheer him up. Little did I know then that within the next three hours, this fine officer would be lost to us. Perhaps my words of encouragement were the last he was to hear in this life.

Around dawn, the CO's party including me and my small medical team, moved to a small village consisting of a few huts. There were men and women and children in them—the first Pakistanis I was coming across. They were crying out in fear on seeing us, thinking probably that we would finish them

off. We just ignored them. Once more the Pakistanis started shelling, and we crouched in those frail huts. CO and I were in a hut. I noticed that CO didn't show the slightest trace of fear, but calmly sat on, directing the operations on his walkie-talkie. I tried to contract myself like a ball as each explosion rocked the place. When the shelling subsided a little later, I saw that the whole place was littered with shell splinters which were like so many crooked daggers. Once again we had escaped.

A little later we started for the 'A' company location. We moved cautiously, especially when we were crossing the open field. I could hear the whine of bullets once again. The jawans in our party, under CO's orders, checked thoroughly every hut on our way with fingers ready on the rifle triggers. But they were all deserted. Finally we reached our A coy location and the Sikh major who commanded it greeted

CO. He had captured an artillery gun of the Pakistanis in the early morning, by a surprise attack. I saw the bodies of four Pakistani regular soldiers huddled together in a bunker. One of our jawans had been shot through the ear at close range and had died instantaneously; his body lay there with right arm raised, in the act of throwing a grenade---truly killed in action. In a hut near-by, the bodies of some local Bengalis lay, including that of women and children. One or two men were just dying. So much concentrated suffering I was seeing for the first time and it made me sick.

Suddenly we heard an ominous zooming sound and everyone took cover. The next few minutes were the most terrifying ones I ever experienced. The Pakistani fighter planes dived low over the area which was so familiar to them, it being their own gun position, and strafed the place with their machineguns. I crouched into the

corner of a hut as the terror-striking zoom of the jets flying so low over us came and went one after the other, sowing seeds of death. They flew off finally after few minutes which never seemed to end. Again, we had escaped miraculously.

CO asked me to stay on with the A coy and establish the forward-most medical post there, for dealing with casualties as early as possible. This was again another unique experience for me—or for any medical officer for that matter—as doctors are required to stay with the battalion HQ only and not with forward companies.

So, I and the Sikh major accommodated ourselves in the dead Pakistanis' bunker. When it was getting dark, we heard the rumbling of a tank—it was an enemy tank for sure. Was it approaching? If so we were written off as our tanks had not yet reached us. The major had a bright idea. He ordered our recoil-less gun to be fired

once in the direction of the sound of the tank. This was done. Perhaps the Pakistanis thought that our tanks had also reached. Anyway the rumbling of the tank stopped. But after some time intense mortar shelling and rifle and machine gun firing started. It seemed as if the noises were gradually coming nearer and nearer. I think at no other time had I prayed as fervently as I prayed then. If the worst happened, I prayed that I shouldn't fall into the hands of the Pakistanis alive. Everyone was alert and tense. The major was standing with his sten gun ready. However after about fifteen minutes of suspense and anxiety, the firing subsided. My prayer was answered.

It was months later, while sipping drinks with the CO and other officers in the mess that I came to know in retrospect about the extremely dangerous position in which we had remained then. The Pakistanis always counterattacked any position they lost, trying their best to recapture it. In this

particular case, a valuable artillery gun, a truck, and much ammunition were involved and it was indeed strange that they didn't put a desperate attempt to recapture the position. Had they done so in strength with tank support, we would have been simply wiped out as our strength was not much and we had no tanks at that time.

The night of 2nd December ended with intense artillery shelling by the enemy. After it was over, a soldier who had been hit by a splinter was brought to me. He had been hit on the head and was stone dead when I saw him. I noticed that his name was Vincent, an Adivasi Christian from Bihar. Under normal circumstances, the poor chap would be getting ready for his X'mas reunion with his family! However it was never to be.

The next morning, on 3rd December, we awoke to a bright and quiet morning in contrast to the dark and tense night. We had a much-needed

wash and ablutions. We caught some chicken from a near-by deserted hut and used the rations left by the dead Pakistani soldiers to have a good meal. I was beginning to feel the abandon of the soldier in occupied territory---using others' property without the mildest conscience prick!

From the small transistor radio of the major, our only link with the external world, we came to know that Pakistan had declared war at last.

6. THE NIGHT OF DEATH AND MISERY

The night of fourth December is vivid in my memory. I was on my legs throughout that night. Our thrust on Akhaura took place on that night and our battalion spearheaded the attack. The first casualty reached me just ten minutes after we attacked, and since then casualties poured in throughout the night, until eight next morning. I and my small medical team dealt with these, evacuating the more serious to the rear after 'expert first aid'. Some of these brave soldiers I can never forget. There was one who, after getting dressed by me for a bullet wound, went back to the front, taking ammunition. There was the soldier who lay with both his thighs crushed into a pulpy mass of flesh and broken bone; he smiled bravely as I dressed and reassured him. There was the officer who had a miraculous escape: two bul-

lets had grazed either side of his head cutting both ears into halves and furrowing the scalp. Had he moved even an inch on either side, he would have been killed instantly. I too had my closest brush with death that night. When the attack was going on, and I was attending to the casualties, the Pakistanis started shelling the area intensely and with deadly accuracy. There was a loud explosion followed by a scream from a soldier at my elbow. I saw that a shell splinter had pierced his abdomen, causing his bowels to come out. I gave a pressure pack over his tummy and evacuated him to the rear immediately.

The deadly shelling didn't scare me so much as on previous occasions because my hands were busy and I had no idle moment for worrying. At one moment however, I thought that we were having reverses and that patients, doctor, everyone would be taken and killed.

So I kept busy with the wounded

jawans. There was precious little I could do at that stage except bandaging the wounds, splinting fractures, and relieving pain with morphia (in tube syringes), recording whatever done on a piece of paper and shoving it into the patient's pocket for reference by the field hospital in the rear. But this little aid was important; more than anything else was the psychological factor. The knowledge that their doctor was with them at the front was one of the morale-boosting factors for the troops. CO came round and expressed appreciation and encouragement in my work.

The dark night of death and misery was at last over and it was dawn. The bright morning brought glad news. The Pakistanis had fled and we had taken Akhaura. Two or three jets made their appearance in the sky. Everyone was scared, especially with lot of wounded soldiers lying on the open ground, there being no space in my improvised shelter. However our fears were removed soon enough when

these planes were identified as belonging to our own Air Force. They went beyond Akhaura and we could hear them pounding the Pak positions. We knew later that the Pak Air Force had been virtually wiped out by then.

A good piece of work by the Air Force was that they sent two big helicopters which landed on the school ground near our location. These made two trips and all the casualties were taken straight to the field hospitals. I felt as relieved as at the end of a tough exam. I had done my little bit as well as I could and had come out unscathed in the process. I thanked God for saving me, but then I felt ashamed at my selfishness----for, how many had their lives snuffed out that night and how many more had been crippled for life!

I heard with great shock that the smart young lieutenant who was the first to welcome me to the battalion barely one week back, had received a machine-gun blast at close range and

had died on the spot. I remembered how I saw him sitting near our bunker on the previous night, waiting for the attack to begin. I had thought then that he looked a little tired and gloomy. The icy hands of death were then slowly closing on him.

The next day, the Corps commander, Lt.Gen.Shagat Singh visited our location. We officers were introduced to him. He was happy with our achievements.

I had an opportunity to see the captured town of Akhaura. I was astounded to see the solid defences of the Pakistanis. It was indeed a tribute to the bravery of our troops that we could capture such a well-defended position. Perhaps the enemy had been completely demoralised as well.

I saw half-eaten bodies being pecked at by vultures and jackals. Mostly they were of Razakars and some, of Pak regulars. What an end for a

human life! Worse than that of a dog!

There were open shops and buildings, deserted. The citizens were slowly coming out. Our troops behaved in a disciplined manner generally although there were few isolated cases of looting of some shops.

7. CLOSING IN ON THE PAKS

And then, on the 7th December, we were given a new assignment; a minor one, we hoped, for a somewhat badly mauled battalion like ours. We first moved back to Agartala. In contrast to the silent trudge under cover of darkness on December 1st, this return journey was along the main road in trucks. The citizens of Agartala had at last shed their apathy and had erected triumphal arches and greeted us at many places in the town, garlanding us, giving oranges etc to us. This was a novel experience for me.

That afternoon we crossed the border once again into Pakistan. It was a long, long march, the longest I had ever done. We started at 2 pm and reached our destination, dead tired, around midnight. The whole medical platoon was with me now, the other

doctor having gone with the CO's party. We had some tense moments during the march. We lost contact with those who went before us, and were perplexed when we reached a crossroad. To add to the confusion, there was a sound as that of a tank from somewhere ahead of us. We were positive that our tanks had not reached. Were they Pak tanks? There was every possibility of our losing our way and falling into Pakistani hands. I shuddered at the prospect. However, everything went all right and we finally reached the Shabazpur Bridge, our destination, by midnight. I crept into the bunker on the road-side, occupied by our officers and almost immediately went to sleep.

The next day, on December the eighth, we moved down the Shabazpur River in a big steam launch of the Pakistanis. Sentries stood alert on the top of the launch with their rifles and light machine guns ready. Nothing untoward happened, however.

There was a young second lieutenant with me in the cabin of the launch. He was barely twenty and had joined the battalion as his first unit, after passing out from the Academy just one week prior to the operations. His name was Chowdhary and he was a smart young fellow. We shared our lunch sitting in the cabin of the steam launch, talking about various things and hoping that the war would be over soon. We were glad that we had come out safely after the major ordeal of the battalion at Akhaura. We got out of the launch after about 2 hours' journey along the river.

We then moved by road to a place called Serail, using some of the local buses. At Serail, we camped in a school building. The local people were very helpful to us---for carrying loads as well as to feed us with rice, eggs etc. The soldiers who had been subsisting on 'Sakkarp~aras'(small blocks of jaggery and malt cooked hard and dry;

this could remain without getting bad for 4 to 5 days) eagerly devoured the food offered to them.

I had a good wash followed by a hot dinner of parottas and chicken curry brought by the local Bengalis. I arranged my medical set-up and then lay down for a much-needed sleep.

The next day, on 9th December, I remained at the school building with the adjutant, keeping track of the goings-on over the walkie-talkie. It seemed as if we had encountered stiff resistance and that there were a number of casualties. I was shocked to hear that among the wounded, was 2nd lieutenant Chowdhary, my lunch companion of the day before. I hoped that it was nothing serious.

By afternoon, we also started moving to the forward positions with the medical platoon and other groups. However, after marching for about thirty minutes, we got CO's orders on

the wireless to go back to our previous positions. When we were wondering what had happened, we were surprised to see small dark figures spring up on the horizon all around us. They were undoubtedly soldiers in uniform. Were they our own troops or were they Pakistanis? We didn't have to wonder for long. They were our own troops who had retreated in confusion. They gave exaggerated accounts of serious reverses at the front. The adjutant scolded them for turning back and started to collect them again for taking them to the front himself. He told he would shoot to death anyone who turned back. I too felt irritated and ashamed of the soldiers who had turned back. But I knew later that it was not the fault of the poor chaps. It appeared that it was a somewhat badly planned operation without proper artillery and tank support. Also, we had under-estimated the Pakistanis' strength. They were much more than expected and had staged a fierce coun-

terattack unexpectedly and our troops could not hold on.

So I went back to the school building at Serail and hastily set up my medical organization for receiving casualties. They started coming in soon after. However, they were not as many as at Akhaura. Besides, we were near a road this time. I got the help of the locals including some of the local doctors and sent my casualties after first aid, straight to the Field Hospital by ambulance.

Later in the night I heard what had happened in that unfortunate attack. There was a big Pakistani concentration at Bhairab Bazar across the river Meghna. We were on this side, near Ashuganj. There were a number of Pakistanis at Ashuganj also and it was them we had attacked. The bridge across the broad Meghna had been blown up earlier by the Pakistanis themselves. So the group at Ashuganj was trapped and they had counter-

attacked our troops unexpectedly in sheer desperation. And as mentioned earlier, their strength was more than what we had expected to be, and that had caused the tragedy.

What pained me most was that about twenty casualties of ours, who had been kept in a hut for evacuation to the rear, were taken by the Pakistanis. And in defiance of all accustomed standards and humanitarian considerations, all of them were killed and even disfigured. My poor young friend Chowdhary was one of those. He had made the supreme sacrifice for his Country at so young an age, barely one week after he had started on his life's career. I felt as if I had lost a younger brother. May his noble soul find eternal rest in God!

In the night we had reorganized our troops and put in a fresh attack, succeeding in throwing the Pakistanis out of Ashuganj to their concentration across the river at Bhairab Bazar. This

latter place was to be left alone for the time being.

8. SOLDIERS IN THE SKY

On 10th December, we moved to an important town known as 'Brahman Baria'. We had been given yet another assignment. This was again a unique experience for me. Our battalion was to be air-lifted the next morning to a place called Narsingdi, about 30 miles north to Dacca. The air-lift would be over the broad Meghna River. Our duty was to prevent the big concentration at Bhairab Bazar in the further north from moving back to Dacca--in other words, to act as a wedge between the two. Well, if the Pakistanis decided to force their way through, we would be in thick soup indeed!

CO called a conference and detailed duties for us. We had a grand dinner with chicken curry and juicy oranges for dessert. I hoped and prayed that this wouldn't be our last dinner!

And so on the morning of 11th

December I got ready with my medical platoon for the air-lift. There were altogether 20 helicopters making repeated sorties for transporting the troops. They would land, and while the propellers went on rotating at full speed, we were to duck and rush inside as fast as we could, and the 'copters would be airborne again within ten seconds. I and my medical team managed it without mishap. I sat at the edge of the seat near the open back-end of the 'copter, tensing my muscles to guard against falling off. We saw the broad Meghna River beneath us, and after quite some time, landed at our destination. We marched to a village near the road to Dacca. I established my medical set-up in a hut. The air-lift continued the whole day, lifting a brigade strength and artillery support.

The people were very co-operative in carrying loads and providing us with food. This was a most important factor for our subsequent victory as we had no arrangement of our own for

food, or vehicles to carry ammunition, because of the air-lift. The joy of the people on seeing us, and their co-operation was a measure of the brutalities they had suffered from the Pakistanis and their burning hatred for them. We had caught some Pak prisoners whom we had no other alternative but to leave to the people, as we had no arrangements for taking prisoners with us at that stage. The villagers, crying for their blood, simply beat them to death in a near-by field. Such brutalization of the human mind---the initial brutalities of the Pakistanis and the punishment they were getting now at the hands of the Bengalis--- made one feel really pessimistic about the human race. This was certainly a far cry from the acme of civilization and evolution, man, made in the image of God!

9. THE RACE TO DACCA

The next day, on 12th December, we moved further south along the road to Dacca, utilizing a number of civilian buses. We camped at a place called Panchrookhi, about 15 miles north to Dacca. The 'Joi Bangla' spirit was evident everywhere. On 13th, we moved still further south to a village called Karnagope. This involved certain amount of marching by foot. The villagers, as before, took care of our accommodation and food. We were very near Dacca now, less than 10 km or so. There were two rivers between us and Dacca. A patrol party from another Infantry battalion had crossed the river and had faced stiff resistance. The next afternoon, on 14th Dec, we moved still further south to a village called 'Utter Rupsi'. We were hearing in our small transistor radio about the move of the seventh fleet of the U.S. into the Bay of Bengal. I wondered what would hap-

pen. Was India going to be the venue of the ultimate end---the third World War? Gen. Manekshaw, over the radio, was calling on the Pakistani top brass to surrender. Would sense prevail? I went to sleep hearing the boom of our artillery guns pounding Dacca's outskirts.

The next day, on 15th Dec, we continued to stay at Utter Rupsi. I completed my diary up-to-date using some blank papers. I bought some essential things like soap etc from a local shop---my first purchase in Pakistan! The shopkeeper readily accepted the Indian currency giving Pakistani change back. The locals gave us really wonderful food, even fruits and milk. They told---just get us liberty and we will do everything for you.

10. VICTORY!

And on to the morning of 16th December. Events were moving fast to a climax. Gen.Niazi had asked for time and Gen.Manekshaw had granted it. Meanwhile the 7th fleet was closing in. Was Gen.Niazi's posture, a treachery? We listened to each and every news bulletin with bated breath. Around 12 noon, we heard that Maj.Gen.Jacob of the Eastern Command was going to Dacca for negotiations of surrender. Meanwhile, we started our move once again, crossing the river Lakhya and approaching Dacca. Around 3 pm, we heard over the radio that cease-fire had been proclaimed. **THE WAR WAS OVER AND THE PAKISTANIS HAD SURRENDERED TO US!** It was indeed a glorious moment for us.

We moved along the road to Dacca. The surrendered Pak.soldiers were marching along with us. They were wishing us, we were shaking

hands with their officers---it all seemed like the end of a friendly hockey match in which we had won and they had lost! And only minutes before, we were intent on destroying each other. This was yet another unique experience for me.

I soon came to know that the danger was not over as yet. The trigger-happy 'Mukti Bahini' started firing at random at the Pakistanis and since we were also marching with them, we were in great danger of getting hit. In fact one of our officers from another battalion got a shot in the chest and died at this last moment, after we had won the war.

Around 8pm, we reached the celebrated Race Course maidan in the heart of Dacca, where Lt.Gen.Niazi had surrendered barely 4 hours back to Lt.Gen.Arora, G.O.CinC of the Eastern Command. We had a Pakistani colonel as prisoner with us who cracked jokes and what not! I remember examining him for a leg ailment and suggesting

something.

On the next day, 17th December, the Race Course maidan was full of local citizens who had dared to step out into the streets after a long time, as they themselves told. We were given the VIP treatment---they were eager to shake hands with us, talk with us, to get our autographs. Pretty girls garlanded us, applied 'tilak on our foreheads! We were 'God-sent angels' to liberate them, they said. Indira Gandhi was the 'goddess of democracy'! We roamed about the streets of Dacca and were cheered everywhere. We were taken into houses and entertained with refreshments. I was naturally feeling happy and elated at all this---such a happy contrast to the miseries of the last sixteen days. My happiness was sobered however with the thought of the corpses we had left behind and the cripples languishing in various hospitals.